

Wilmot Town News



The start of Mavicki Road, a Class VI highway in Wilmot (Photo: Bill Chaisson)

N.H. Road Classification Explained

The planning board is spending the next several months discussing future development on Class VI roads in Wilmot. The town is developing a plan to respond in a consistent way to future development requests.

In 1929 the State of New Hampshire introduced a road classification system that divided them into six classes.

- Class I roads are the primary highways in the state. This includes all the interstates and the largest state highways. In Wilmot that includes NH Route 11 and US Route 4.
- Class II roads are the secondary state highways. In Wilmot this includes NH Rt. 4A and the portion of Kearsarge Mountain Road between Kearsarge Valley Road and the entrance to Winslow State Park.
- Class III roads are those that are within state parks and other recreational areas. In Wilmot the road from Kearsarge Mountain Road to the trailhead and picnic area in Winslow State Park is Class III, as is the gravel road out to Morey Pond from Twist Hill Road.
- “Class IV highways are portions of state-numbered highways passing through sections of municipalities mainly occupied by dwellings or buildings in which people live or business is conducted.” There are no Class IV roads in Wilmot because we have no densely populated areas characterized by dwellings and businesses close together.
- Class V highways are town roads maintained by the town highway department. Most roads in Wilmot are in this class. It includes both paved and unpaved roads.
- Class VI roads are town-owned roads that are no longer maintained by the town. We have 18 in Wilmot and they became Class VI in two different ways.

Many Class VI roads are so old that they pre-date the classification system and entered it as unmaintained roads in 1929. The population of Wilmot was 495 at the time, down from 1,272 in 1850. Many of the town roads were no longer used, the farms along them having been abandoned.

Fowlertown, a village on the Wilmot/Springfield border, was entirely abandoned by 1920, so Fowlertown Road has always been Class VI. Usually, only the far ends of roads like Lajoie, Messer, Kenniston and Old North Road entered the system as Class VI because there was no one living on that part of them anymore.

The town government chose to keep the easements on these roads in the event that the population should recover and they would need the roads again. However, the population of Wilmot continued to decline until 1950, when it reached a low of 370 residents. At this time, warrant articles began appearing that suggested that some roads be “discontinued subject to gates & bars.”

This designation meant that the town would keep its easement, but allow landowners to erect an unlocked gate or barrier to keep livestock off the Class V road but allow them to graze freely along the Class VI portion.

In 1953 at town meeting, Kinerson (aka Pocket; off North Wilmot), Mavicki (off Grafton), Willow View (off Breezy Hill), Poor (continuation of Quaker Path), and Patterson roads were all discontinued subject to gates & bars.

Then the fortunes of the town did swing upward. Eventually, in 1989, part of Patterson Road was redeveloped and became a Class V road again. Most of our Class VI roads, however, are in remote parts of Wilmot. It may be too expensive to maintain these roads with modern services. Therefore the town government will be making policy to determine the fiscally prudent way forward. ☺

A sustainable rural community here?

The last iteration of the Wilmot Master Plan, approved in 2018, was informed by a 2016 survey of 357 town residents. The takeaway from the survey was that the respondents did not want anything to change in Wilmot. The long-term vision for the town was declared to be “to protect its quiet, friendly, rural small-town atmosphere.”

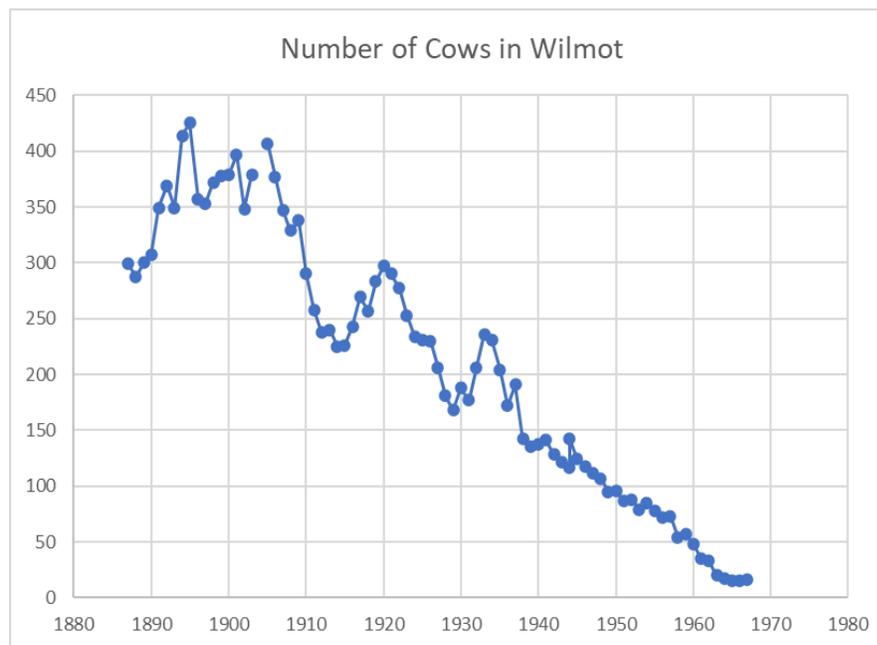
The plan, however, never supplied a definition of “rural.” The U.S. census and federal government departments define “urban” in terms of population density. “Rural” is then defined as “not urban.” There is absolutely no consensus about what rural means beyond this.

Once upon a time, rural had the connotation of being the source of things. It was where the resources were, the source of not just food but also the materials essential to manufacturing. During the 20th century, increased centralization abetted by improved transportation systems gradually drained rural communities of their *raison d’être*. Both farming and small-scale industry declined and in some places, like Wilmot, disappeared.

After a false start in the 1970s, a rural revival began to rebuild viable economies in thinly populated areas. Sustainable farming and artisan production of goods now have workable business models and entrepreneurial participants in a growing number of regions around the country.

John Ikerd, an emeritus economics professor at the University of Missouri summed up what was needed for a revival to occur:

Based on a lifetime of experiences, I have concluded that most people change only when three conditions are met. **First**, they must become convinced that what they have been doing isn't working and isn't likely to work in the future. **Next**, they must have a realistic idea or vision of something fundamentally better they could do



Cows as a proxy for the decline of the Wilmot rural economy. Data from annual reports.

instead. And **finally**, they must believe that it's possible for them to make the transition from what they are doing now to what they would rather do; they have to have hope for a better future. Real change is always difficult and often risky. Lacking any one of the three, people just keep on doing what they've been doing.

The results of the 2016 Wilmot survey indicate that respondents felt unambiguously that Wilmot's version of “rural” is working fine. However, this is likely because of Ikerd's second criterion: they don't have a picture of something that could be better.

As it happens, between the 1940s and the 1980s, Freedom Acres on Old Winslow Road pioneered a model for operating a successful rural business based on local resources. Katherine White and Donna Niles, two WWII veterans, made jams and preserves from locally harvested berries and fruits and sold them throughout the United States by mail-order catalog.

This is exactly the kind of business that is now reviving rural communities around the country. But today entrepreneurs are supported by the internet and by a network of training programs and academic curricula.

In 2011 Ben Hewitt published *The Town that Food Saved*, which chronicled the development of a sustainable agricultural community in Hardwick,

Vt. (pop. 1,100). The town is so small and remote that their model focused on making value-added items and trucking them to population centers for sale. This was necessary because there weren't enough local customers for the produce grown in and around Hardwick.

In 2018 Kathryn Olson, a sociologist at Boston College, did a study on the town's economy to see if the model was working.

Using Census data, [my study] finds that between 2000 and 2016, the unemployment rate in Hardwick remained steady, mean incomes increased, and 296 new jobs have been retained. In addition, the percentage of families in Hardwick with income below the poverty level decreased between 2000 and 2016, and the percentage of families accessing supplemental nutrition assistance program (SNAP) benefits increased.

Endemic poverty complicated the Hardwick quest for sustainability. Wilmot is relatively wealthy and the growing season here is longer than it is in the Northeast Kingdom.

We now have one full-time farmer in Wilmot. Is this the start of “something fundamentally better”? ☞

VACANCY

The Town of Wilmot is looking for a part-time handy-person to do minor repairs and maintenance at town-owned properties. Contact admin@wilmotnh.org or call 603-526-4802.